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## Op-Ed: Will the Syrian Civil War Last 10 More Years?

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The Syrian civil war began in March 2011 when large numbers of peaceful protestors began demanding an end to the brutal autocratic rule of President Bashar Assad. Many Syrian demonstrators hoped that their dictatorship could be overthrown as easily as those in Tunisia and Egypt as part of the regional process now known as the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, Syria is a very different type of country, with a dictatorship which is both more violent and more deeply entrenched than those previously found in Cairo and Tunis. Consequently, the Syrian regime punished the antigovernment demonstrators with severe repression, leading many of them to take up arms to fight an enemy that was determined to retain power at all costs. This process has now led to a very long internal war which has the potential to become much longer.

It is worth consulting Syrian history when gauging the likelihood of this war to continue. Modern Syria was carved out of the Arab territories of Ottoman Turkey in the aftermath of World War I. It was a diverse country with multiple religious and sectarian groups including Sunnis, Shi'ites, Alawites, Druzes, Turkomen, Kurds, and various denominations of Christians. About 60 percent of the population is Sunni Arab. The Ottomans had previously manipulated the problems among these Syrian communities as part of a divide-and-rule policy. It was the French, however, who later emerged as the true masters of such policies when they became the protecting power under a 1923 League of Nations' mandate. After that time, France consciously recruited minorities for the local security forces in the belief that these groups were not particularly interested in an independent Syria where they would probably be marginalized. Minority youth from groups such as the Alawites also flocked to join the local army as a step up from the desperate poverty of their

community. Eventually, many young Alawite men attended the Military Academy at Homs to become officers in the French-controlled military. Sons from well-off Sunni families almost never considered military careers under the French.

The strong Alawite presence in the Syrian military continued after the French role in Syria ended, even though Alawites are only about 10 percent of the population. The initial foothold this group had in the military also expanded greatly after 1970 when Alawite air force general Hafez Assad seized power. His son, Bashar, assumed power in 2000 upon his father's death and eventually proved as ruthless as his father. At the present time, Bashar is attempting to crush anti-regime oppositionists through the use of savage repression inflicted by mostly Alawite elite military units, the intelligence services, and the pro-regime shabiha militias. Since the regime does not want to use up its Alawite soldiers and militiamen in battle, these troops often use firepower, including artillery and airpower, to strike at rebel forces despite the tremendous collateral damage inflicted by the near indiscriminate use of these weapons.

Under such circumstances, many Alawites fear Sunni vengeance for the years of Assad misrule and anti-Sunni discrimination, and Alawites are correspondingly prepared to fight to the last bullet. They also fear the potential emergence of a democratic government in a country where Sunni Arabs would outnumber Alawite voters 6 to 1. Other minorities which have cooperated with the regime over the years also fear majority vengeance. Non-Sunni Islamic groups (Shi'ites, Druzes) and especially Syria's Christians are terrified that radical Islamist fighters will take power after Assad and that they may suffer a fate even worse than Iraq's Christians following the collapse of governance after Saddam. These groups are desperately trying to oppose rebel groups that might harm them, while seeking to avoid appearing so pro-regime that they will inevitably suffer the same fate as Alawite loyalists if Assad goes down.

In this environment, most Alawites and possibly other minorities, view the civil war as threatening the future existence of their communities. It is also viewed as beyond compromise by many rebels. Assad's regime rules by fear, and that kind of system requires people to be punished harshly for disloyalty and to keep others in line. Forgiveness is viewed as weakness, and brutality is the default approach of the Syrian regime for all problems. Rebels who lay down their arms face death, and they know it. This leaves the international community with two sides which have no reason to compromise and every reason to continue fighting. Neither side will compromise in the middle of a conflict that they view as potentially detrimental for themselves, their families, and their communities. Moreover, the death of any leader, including Assad, will probably not

result in a more compromising successor under such conditions. To make matters worse, the collapse of the Assad regime would probably only lead to a new phase of the civil war in which very different kinds of rebel groups fight each other for power.

Unfortunately, at the present time, diplomatic solutions also seem unlikely, and the war could well go on until all sides are too exhausted to continue. The Lebanese Civil War lasted 15 years under similar circumstances. In the short term, the United States, Europe, and the rest of the international community probably cannot do very much to bring about the end of the Syrian civil war, but they can minimize the problems of external spillover by working with allies such as Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq which are struggling to help Syrian refugees in their countries. They can also help provide urgently needed support to aid organizations that operate within Syrian borders. The United States, in particular, will also need to be prepared to take advantage of any changing prospects for a diplomatic solution despite the apparent unraveling of the Geneva talks on Syria.

Americans need to understand this may be a long, horrible war, and that the international community may need to plan for years of humanitarian aid for those remaining in Syria and those that have fled the bloodbath. It is also important to give strong and continuing support to countries like Jordan that need to ensure that their government does not buckle under the challenges of caring for large numbers of refugees. The ongoing nature of this struggle is difficult to accept, but it may be the only realistic way in which this problem can be understood. There is no point to deceiving oneself about a virtually unstoppable war. The United States has only very limited ability to shape the outcome of the Syrian civil war, and any actions it takes must be done in the full knowledge that this could be a very long war.

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